



ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

Interview: Jia Zhang-ke

by Andrew Chan

RESTORED

Title:

Xiao Wu / 小武

Director:

Jia Zhangke

Runtime: 112 minutes

Country: China

Language: Mandarin with
English subtitles

AWARDS

NETPAC AWARD

Berlin International Film
Festival 1998

NEW CURRENTS AWARD

Busan International Film
Festival 1998

GOLDEN MONTGOLFIERE

Nantes Three Continents
Festival 1998

Celebrating the classics of Asian cinema and beyond, *Restored* is a regular series showcasing Asian films that have been meticulously preserved and restored by different institutions from across the world. The platform revisits these classics in a new light and allows them to be appreciated by new generations of audiences.

Anyone following the early films of Jia Zhangke would have pegged the Mainland Chinese wunderkind as a realist, fixated on the gritty textures and languid rhythms of provincial life. Who would have guessed that, in *The World* (04), Jia would start toying with cartoon interludes and rainbow-colored dance sequences? Or that a UFO would lift off from the rubble of the Three Gorges in *Still Life* (06)?

Like the China of today's headlines, Jia's films bundle together epic ambitions and uncomfortable dissonances, so it only makes sense that they would broaden their scope to visualize both the minutiae of day-to-day experience and the fantasies that underpin the nation's breakneck progress. These startling leaps of imagination have coincided with other developments over the past five years that complicate our understanding of Jia's art. In addition to winning government approval for his projects and a Golden Lion in Venice (for *Still Life*), he has departed from the setting of his home province of Shanxi and repositioned himself as a wide-ranging national auteur.

In his latest films—the documentary-fiction hybrid *24 City* and the short *Cry Me a River*—Jia has caught a serious case of nostalgia. Channeling the mood that emerged from the Maoist era and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre through a series of aesthetic and pop-culture references, this new work finds him at his most cinephilic and meta-cinematic. Not only do the films impart what it is like to live in the aftermath of these two generation-defining moments, but in their playful allusiveness they offer a glimpse of what Chinese cinema has meant to native audiences, past and present.

As the leading Chinese filmmaker of your generation, do you feel any pressure or responsibility as to the way you represent China to foreign audiences?

I haven't ever felt that I had a special responsibility to a particular audience. As an artist in China, my goal is to express what we have experienced and felt, but this expression isn't limited, and isn't just directed at viewers from any particular country. Part of the reason I started making films was to respond to cinema's blind spots, its silences, on the kind of life I knew. I grew up in Fenyang, Shanxi, and lived there until I was 21. After studying film in Beijing for four years, I discovered that there weren't any movies that had any relationship to my own life. I wanted to express all the memorable things that I had experienced, and I think this is still my primary responsibility as a filmmaker.

What films did you study when you were at Beijing Film Academy?

In Beijing we had a curriculum that covered both international and Chinese

film history. These two parts had a huge influence on my work, but I especially appreciated learning about Chinese film from its beginnings (*The Battle of Dingjunshan* [1905]) up to the Eighties. When film came to China, and once it had connected itself to Chinese culture, it produced a lot of very interesting results. Chinese people always had an inherent love for theater, and in our past we had rich traditions in Beijing opera and pingshu [a Chinese tradition in which one performer would tell stories to an audience] were intensely theatrical. And this history fed into the Chinese audience's desire for movies. Even now we still sometimes use the Chinese word for "play" to mean "movie." When we studied international film history, we also studied it from the very beginning, from the invention of film to the traditions of the Lumière Brothers and Méliès. At that time, the three most important areas for those of us studying film were French cinema, Japanese cinema, and Soviet cinema.

You've written most of the screenplays for your films on your own, but you co-wrote *24 City* with the poet Zhai Yongming. Could you tell me what that process was like and why you chose to work with her?

Before we started collaborating on the script, we talked for a long time about the lives of workers, the factory, and what kinds of discussions this film needed to provoke. After we had talked, I wrote the first draft, which I later gave Zhai to revise. She is a Chengdu native with a profound understanding of the city, and she really helped me in localizing this film. I also realized that there were going to be a lot of female characters, and Zhai really helped me in capturing women's emotions and ideas in the parts played by Lü Liping, Joan Chen, and Zhao Tao. Since you brought in Zhai to collaborate with you on *24 City*, could you comment on the film's relationship to literature? Your films often reference other arts. Many have an element of theatrical performance, while *Still Life* evokes Chinese landscape painting.

I like a strong mix of different media in my films, because it brings out the complexity of life. I'm not interested in making a film that exists as a simplistic, closed-off universe. In *24 City*, there is a lot of language and text that the viewer is given to read, including poetry, and there are also shots that function like portrait photography, confronting the subjects in moments of silence. These elements complement each other. Language has certain limitations, but it acts as a complement to silence and allows us to use our imagination. To tackle the challenge of giving viewers a clear sense of China's complicated realities, you need to use a variety of methods.



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Your first films were in a more traditional realist mode, but since *The World*, you've employed elements of fantasy. How has your commitment to realism changed?

I think surrealism is a crucial part of China's reality. In the past 10 or so years, China has experienced the kinds of changes that might happen across a span of 50 or even 100 years in any normal country, and the speed of these changes has had an unsettling, surreal effect. For example, in *The World*, the World Park setting in Beijing is itself a fantasy; the first time I visited, I was disoriented by all those replicas of monuments from all over the world concentrated into such a small space. It was as if I had entered a fairyland.

I learned that people's lives within that space are also quite surreal. When I spoke to the women who perform at the park, they said they had danced the same dance there everyday for the past three years. While they felt a kind of freedom in being able to randomly enter into different parts of the world, they also felt trapped in this insular environment.

Another example is *Still Life*. When I went to look at Fengjie, the location where we shot the film, every county we saw had basically been reduced to rubble. Seeing this place, with its 2,000 years of history and dense neighborhoods left in ruins, my first impression was that human beings could not have done this. The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it.

How has your approach to digital cinematography evolved?

From *Unknown Pleasures* up to now, [cinematographer] Yu Lik-wai and I have been looking for the beauty in the DV format. I love it because of how suitable it is for the fast-paced shooting we do. I often joke that, if it weren't for DV, I wouldn't be able to capture the changes that are happening in China, because they're so fast! While making *Still Life*, I kept saying we could shoot it in one week if we wanted to. DV is a medium that belongs to this age, and I wanted to find how it could have a beauty of its own. When we were shooting *The World*, we tried to create a digital texture, because the World Park has such an artificial feeling. We worked hard to create what we called a "poetic-digital" style. On *Still Life*, I initially thought I wanted it to be very realistic, but I couldn't ignore the surreal aspects of the Three Gorges landscape. I had to use fantastical elements, because without them I wouldn't have been able to adequately express the utter strangeness of our contemporary reality. I wanted to depict the compression of time, the sense of no longer living a natural existence.

What's the source of your long-shot, long-take style, which many compare to the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Yasujiro Ozu?

I think, in my own films, the rhythms come from life. One of the reasons I love Hou and Ozu so much is the way their films match the rhythm and emotion of Chinese people's lives. I think anyone's film technique stems directly from the way he views life. In my long shots and long takes, my goal is to respect the viewer's agency, and even to give my films a sense of democracy. I want audiences to be able to freely choose how they want to interact with what's on screen. But everyone's reasons for using long shots and long takes are different; personally, I just don't want my position as a director to become dictatorial, because I want my films to be governed by a sense of equality and democracy.

In your last interview with Film Comment in 2003, you discussed your preference for nonprofessional actors and the naturalism they are able to convey. But lately you have expressed interest in working with Maggie Cheung and Jay Chou, and now you've cast Joan Chen in *24 City*. What draws you to working with movie stars at this point in your career?

If I wanted to return to the kind of realist aesthetic I used in the past, I would find new nonprofessional actors to collaborate with. But at this stage in my work, I'm going through a big change. *24 City* is evidence of that. Ten years after making my first film and confronting the problems of modern China, I am interested in the issue of Chinese history, because a lot of the problems we are facing today have their roots in our past. Our political institutions discourage us from confronting and interrogating our history, but I think that kind of work is absolutely necessary. There are three areas of modern history that I'm especially interested in: the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976; 1949, when the PRC was established; and the last years of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century. In a historical film the techniques must be different, and I think I'd need the help of professional actors to bring that history to life.

Let's talk about your new short film, *Cry Me a River*. You've made several short films; what draws you to this form?

The reason I love making short films is the limits of the form, which stir my imagination. For example, in *Cry Me a River* I wanted to see if I could tell a story that spanned 10 years in 15 or 20 minutes. This 10-year story is about the changes that time has effected on a group of young people and their thoughts on marriage. At the end you have this sudden burst of emotion, which the short-film form is able to seize upon very quickly. Short films are comfortable for me to make because they don't require the long process of organization and the financial support of feature films. They're a fast, lively way of releasing my thoughts and feelings. Even though they pose a challenge in terms of the market because they have no real possibilities there, for me short films serve the same function that sketches do before you start a painting, in that they stimulate my excitement and passion.

***Cry Me a River* pays homage to Fei Mu's 1948 film *Spring in a Small Town*, but it also alludes to Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* by casting that movie's romantic leads. The two extremes represented in these references raise the question: how do you position yourself between Chinese cinema's past and present?**

I worship the achievements of Chinese cinema in the Thirties. There are two directors of that period who I love: Fei Mu and Yuan Muzhi. Yuan has a movie called *Street Angel* that I love. *Cry Me a River* is about intellectuals, and it's easy for me to make a connection to *Spring in a Small Town* because Fei Mu's film is about the feelings of intellectuals at a time when so many countries were affected by the Second World War. For me, *Cry Me a River* reenters the world of China in 1989. It shows how, 10 years on, everyone's entered the real world, and some people have married, but deep inside they share a great sense of devastation. On the one hand, I wanted to connect the film to *Spring in a Small Town* with the setting on the river. In Chinese culture, rivers symbolize the passage of time; as Confucius said, "Time is going on like this river, flowing away endlessly day and night." On the other hand, I wanted to use the two lead actors from *Summer Palace* [which was banned in China for its depiction of the Tiananmen incident] to make the audience faintly aware that the characters come from that era. These characters had ideals, wrote poems, had concern for their society. The film references that background but also the

changes that happen in any life, such as aging and marriage. There's a song I like called "Xiangyu tai zao" ("Meeting Too Early"), which talks about that time when a person is too young to understand anything. Everyone needs to learn things in life that nobody can teach them. I wanted to make a film about what that feels like. The subject is very close to my own life, because I belong to that generation.

What is your audience like in China now? Does it mainly consist of academics and intellectuals, or would you consider yourself a popular filmmaker?

I think my films have the ability to reach a lot of people now. Earlier on, they were not so readily available due to government censorship. But now we have a lot of different forms of media in China, such as DVD and the Internet. You can also go to different universities and bars to see these movies. I think cinema is currently interacting with the new media; for example, there is a lot of film criticism coming out of Bulletin Board Systems [popular Chinese online forums]. Reading reviews on BBS of my own films, I realized that my audience is very diverse, and it's not just intellectuals watching my films.

Recently a few Chinese filmmakers—Wong Kar Wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien—have come to the West to make movies. Would you ever consider going abroad for future projects?

I'd like to make films outside of China, because I'm interested in the lives of Chinese people all over the world. I probably won't be telling any purely American or European stories, but I'm interested in Chinese people in America, Europe, and even Africa. Since the Eighties, there has been a lot of emigration, people leaving in search of a better life. I recently went to New York's Chinatown by myself to eat, and watching all the Cantonese people gathered together really moved me, even though I didn't understand what they were saying.

Looking back on the decade between *Xiao Wu* and *24 City*, do you think your goal in making movies has changed?

There has definitely been a change. When I started making *Xiao Wu*, it was merely out of a love of movies and a desire to make them. I also wanted to express all the thoughts and feelings I had suppressed. Now I feel more of a sense of social responsibility. A movie can be a fantasy or it can be a realistic depiction of society. At the same time, a film is a memory. At this point, I'm most interested in emphasizing cinema's function as memory, the way it records memory, and how it becomes a part of our historical experience.

Andrew Chan is web editor at the Criterion Collection. He is a frequent contributor to 4Columns and has also written for Reverse Shot, Slant, Wax Poetics, and other publications.

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